Remarks on Presenting the Medal of Honor to Colonel Paris D. Davis

March 3, 2023

Please, all—please be seated. I have to say at the outset—and I've had the great honor—and we have other Medal of Honor recipients here—and that I've been able to give one of those medals. And we have five here. But this, Mr. Secretary, may be the most consequential day since I've been President. This is an incredible man.

I—a hundred and fifty-eight years ago today, in the White—in this White House, President Lincoln was putting the final touches on his second Inaugural Address. And he wrote, "Let us strive on to finish the work we are in to bind up the Nation's wounds and care for him who shall have borne the battle."

Today, 58 years after he bore the battle, we honor a true hero of our Nation: Colonel Paris Davis. I've had a chance to get to talk to him a little bit. We talked on the phone. And he doesn't know it, but we're going to talk a lot more. [*Laughter*] Incredible guy.

The Medal of Honor, created during Lincoln's Presidency, is our country's highest military award, recognizing gallantry above and beyond the call of duty. That word "gallantry"—it's not much used much these days. "Gallantry." But I can think of no better word to describe Paris—to describe you. I really can't. "Gallantry." And everyone here feels exactly the same way.

That includes Secretary Austin and Secretary McDonough and Secretary of the Army Wormuth and the Vice Chairman Grady and General McConville and Representative Beyer. Where's Representative Beyer. Thank you. Thank you for pushing this a little bit. Appreciate it. For joining us today.

Now, as many of you know, Paris will be the first to tell you that he hates the word "I," that it was his team who served and his team who sacrificed. So today I'm truly honored to welcome one of those teammates: Ron Deese—Deis. Where's Ron? Ron. Thank you. He was the airborne spotter for that team. And it was only a few days ago, right? [*Laughter*]

I also want to thank the previous Medal of Honor recipients who are here, who have joined us today to recognize their brother in arms: Leroy Petry, William Swenson, Melvin Morris, Matthew Williams, and Earl Plumlee. Stand up, guys. You're looking at courage in the flesh.

And finally, Regan, Stephanie, Paris, you already know this, but your dad was a hero. But he didn't have to win this medal for you to know that. You knew it all along. You really did—didn't you?—when you were kids. You knew, growing up. And you know—and, like you, I wish your brother Christopher was still with us to see your dad's final—finally recognize his story.

And you know, it's a story that didn't just begin in the Vietnamese village 58 years ago. Instead, picture Paris in 1956, the son of a Midwestern foundry worker starting his first year at Southern University in the heart of Louisiana.

The college football team quickly noticed that Paris had the grit and the guts they needed on the team. So before long, Paris not only joined the team, but he was named All-American before this. He's a very slow learner, this guy. [*Laughter*] I tell you what.

But, off the field, Paris saw constant reminders that too many—to many he was less than an American and that, in the eyes of the law, he was less than a person. Signs on bars that read "Whites only." Seats on buses where—were off limits for African Americans. Schools, streets, shops divided by segregation.

Paris endured all of this and still chose to join his college ROTC unit, volunteering to serve a country that, in many places, still refused to serve people who looked like him. Right away, it was clear Paris was a born warrior. He became an Army Ranger. Then, he jumped at the chance to join the Green Berets, becoming one of the Nation's first Black special forces officers.

Paris linked—liked the Green Berets because they were elite. It wasn't just, as Paris once said, a "Joe here, Joe there." By the way, it didn't offend me you said, "Joe here, Joe there." [*Laughter*] You know what I mean? That didn't bother me.

But the Green Berets, like our country then, weren't free from discrimination either. People pulled Paris aside to warn him, "Are you sure you want to join? There aren't a lot of people like you—who look like you in this outfit." Well, remember, this was only 14 years after President Truman desegregated our military. Only 14 years later.

But Paris didn't listen to them. And thank God he didn't. Paris helped write the history of our Nation. And this year, we celebrate the 75th anniversary of our first fully integrated Armed Forces and the name "Paris Davis" will still stand alongside the Nation's pioneering heroes.

You know, in the early hours of June 18, 1965, and his—Captain—then-Captain Davis and his team, with three other Green Berets, were wrapping up a job well done. And together, they'd just finished a 10-mile march through the night to support a company of South Vietnamese soldiers on their first combat mission: a raid against the Viet Cong, thick in the jungle of Bồng Sơn. The raid was a success.

But as the sun began to rise, the men heard that haunting sound ring out: a bugle. A bugle. A sure sign of a counterattack. Within minutes, the jungle lit up with enemy fire. Hundreds of Viet Cong began to swarm Captain Davis and his team, pinning them down in a rice paddy with no cover.

Captain Davis rallied his team to fight back, getting so close to the enemy he was battling them hand to hand.

Hours—this is the part that stuns me—hours into that fight, Captain heard—suddenly heard a sound worse than the bugle: his teammate crying out for help. His team sergeant had been shot badly in his foot and his leg, trapping him in the middle of the paddy. And it got worse.

On the far side of the field, his weapons specialist was stuck in a cesspit after being temporarily knocked out by shrapnel. You know, and even further beyond him was his medic, who had been shot in the head.

Captain Davis realized he was the last American standing. Without hesitation, he yelled, "I'm coming for you!" "I'm coming for you!" He called in friendly fire and gave a little bit of cover to run out and rescue his team.

On his first attempt to get to team sergeant, Captain Davis was shot in the arm and had to turn back. Captain Davis waited for another window and sprinted back out again. But his team sergeant was stuck, and Captain Davis couldn't fully break him free before he had to return to cover. He didn't give up though. That's not the Green Beret way.

For his third time, as enemy fire rained down on him, he ran out. Captain Davis freed his team sergeant, threw him over his shoulder, and started carrying up the hill to safety. Captain Davis got about halfway up the hill before a bullet pierced his leg. Then, in front of him, another Green Beret sergeant, who had just arrived to the battle to reinforce the team, was shot in the chest and now needed to be rescued as well.

Captain Davis limped up the hill with his team sergeant on his shoulder. He had been fighting for around 10 hours, but Captain Davis didn't hesitate. He went back down the hill to

retrieve the reinforcement who had been just shot in the chest, all 240 pounds of him. Next, Captain Davis ran to his weapons specialist, who was struck [stuck; White House correction] in that cesspit. Viet Cong fighters continued to spray gunfire across the field as Captain Davis threw his teammate a rope, pulled him out, and began to haul him up the hill as well.

But this time, the rescue helicopter—by this time, the rescue helicopter had landed. Captain Davis's commander gave him a direct order: "Get on board." Davis's response was just as direct. "Sir," he said: "I'm just not going to leave. I still have an American out there."

Unsure if he was still alive, Captain Davis began to plan how he would get his medic. Just the day before, the medic had found out he was the—good news: He was a new father. His wife had given birth to their first child. Captain Davis was going to give him a chance to see his baby boy. He pinpointed the medic's position and began crawling toward him with gunfire and grenades still exploding around him.

When he got there, the medic, still alive, asked him: "Am I going to die? Am I going to die?" Captain Davis responded, "Not before me." Still fending off the Viet Cong assailants, Captain Davis hauled his medic up the hill. And nearly 20 hours—nearly 20 hours later—after that bugle first rang, Captain Davis saved—had saved each one of his fellow Americans. Every single one.

Just as the story of Paris Davis did not begin on June 18, 1965, it does not end there either. Captain Davis went on to become Colonel Davis, serving more than 25 years in our military and earning a Ph.D. on top of that. He received the Silver Star, the Bronze Star, the Air Medal, the Purple Heart.

And even after he hung up his uniform, the captain [colonel; White House correction] continued to serve the community, founding the Metro-Herald, a newspaper that focused on his local community and civil rights issues. I wish I could say that this story of Paris's sacrifice on that day in 1965 was fully recognized and rewarded immediately. But sadly, we know they weren't.

At the time Captain Davis returned from war, the country still battling segregation. He returned from Vietnam to experience some of his fellow soldiers crossing to the other side of the street when they saw him in America. And although the men who were with him on that June day immediately nominated Captain Davis to receive the Medal of Honor, somehow the paperwork was never processed not just once, but twice.

But you know what Captain [Colonel; White House correction] Davis said after learning he would finally receive the Medal of Honor? Quote, "America was behind me." America was behind me. He never lost faith, which I find astounding.

He never stopped believing in the founding vision of our Nation, the vision that Lincoln kept alive 158 years ago, and a vision Paris fought to defend 58 years ago. This vision for a more perfect Union, one where all women and men are created equal.

You know, we're the most unique nation in the world. We're the only nation founded on an idea. Every other nation is founded based on a philosophy based on ethnicity, religion, whatever.

An idea. And it's captured in: We hold these truths in be self-evident that all men and women are created equal, endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights: life, liberty. We've never fully lived up to it, but we've never walked away from it. This is evidence we're still not going to walk away from it.

Look, folks, we never, ever walked away from our troops who dare all and give all to our Nation. Paris, you are everything this medal means. I mean everything this medal means.

And look, you're everything our generation aspired to be. And you are everything our Nation is at our best: brave and big hearted, determined and devoted, selfless and steadfast. American. American.

And now, at long last, it is my great honor to ask Lieutenant Colonel Roe to read the citation.

[*At this point, Lt. Col. Raymond J. Roe, USAF, Air Force Aide to the President, read the citation, and the President presented the medal, assisted by Lt. Col. Azizi V. Wesmiller, USA, Army Aide to the President.*]

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:43 a.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Christopher W. Grady, USN; Army Chief of Staff Gen. James C. McConville, USA; Regan Davis Hopper, daughter of Col. Davis; and Robert Brown, John Reinberg, and William D. Waugh, members of Col. Davis's former special forces unit. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included reading of the citation.

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